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ABSTRACT

The process by which preschoolers construct cohesive oral text was studied in dramatic and constructive play settings. Four preschoolers, two boys and two girls ranging in age from 51 to 60 months, were videotaped for 30 minutes in their preschool classrooms. It was found that players in both contexts of play repeated introductory utterances to begin new play topics. Interlocutors in the dramatic play episodes often repeated the topic initiator's introduction and asked "Wh" and "Yes/No" questions as topic clarification strategies. Topic initiators, in turn, clarified their introductions. Such clarification strategies were not observed in constructive play. Entire social dramatic play episodes were found to be mediated by topic introductory utterances; the play themes defined in the introductions were referred to anaphorically and cataphorically throughout the text. A large number of exophoric references (21% of utterances) were observed in constructive play. Play in this context was less dependent on cohesive text for sustenance. Pedagogical implications are discussed. (Author/SS)

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The Construction of Cohesive Text by Preschoolers in Two Play Contexts *

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Running head: Cohesion in Play

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Abstract

The construction of cohesive text by preschoolers
in two play contexts

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The intent of this study was to determine the process by which preschoolers construct cohesive oral text (Halliday & Hasan, 1975) in two settings: dramatic and constructive play.

Four preschoolers, two boys and two girls ranging in age from 51 to 60 months, were videotaped in their preschool classrooms for thirty minutes during free play. It was found that players in both contexts repeated introductory utterance to begin new play topics. Interlocutors in the dramatic play episodes often repeated the topic initiator's introduction and asked Wh and Yes/No questions as topic clarification strategies. Topic initiators, in turn, clarified their introductions. Such clarification strategies were not observed in constructive play. Entire social dramatic play episodes were found to be mediated by topic introductory utterances; the play themes defined in the introductions were referred to anaphorically and cataphorically throughout the text.

A large number of exophoric references (21% of utterances) were observed in constructive play. Play in this context was less dependent on cohesive text for sustenance. Peadogical implications are discussed.

For a number of years scholars have investigated the relationships between children's linguistic capabilities and school success. Such efforts have ranged from vocabulary studies (Dunn 1965), through the study of usage on the single sentence level (Berieter & Englemann, 1962), to the multi-sentence studies of discourse analysis (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). Researchers examining children's discourse hypothesized that the competencies necessary for success in school and more generally, for success in a literate society, i.e., reading and writing, are based on children's ability to comprehend and construct oral and written text (Olson, 1977). This study will examine the processes by which preschool children introduce and construct oral text in two settings, dramatic play and constructive play, within a preschool classroom.

The extent to which preschoolers used cohesive oral text to convey meaning in two play contexts was examined. The specific aspects of text examined were: the use of explicit verbal reference vs. context dependent reference, i.e., endophora vs exophora, and the process by which new play topics were introduced. Text and the two play settings observed in this study will be discussed in the remainder of this section.

Text, following the Firthian (Firth, 1957; Bazelle, 1966) view of language, and more recently articulated by Halliday and Hasan (1976), is viewed as a semantic whole constructed in a social context by one or more speakers and realized through sentences. This model of text has two elements, cohesion and register. In order for text to be cohesive its meaning must result from the linguistic interdependence of the elements which make it up; one sentence is dependent upon another sentence for meaning. For example:

1. I wonder if Bill's at home.

2. Why don't you call him.

The meaning of him in Sentence 2 is dependent upon the referent Bill in Sentence 1. Each instance of linguistic interdependence within text is referred to a tie. Cohesion is the result of the interpretation between ties within the text. Types of cohesive ties include: reference, e.g., he; substitution, e.g., the same; ellipse, e.g., yes; conjunction, e.g., yet; lexical, e.g., a synonym.

Ties which depend on preceding referents in text for meaning are anaphoric. For example:

3. The car is in good condition.

4. It's only six months old.

Ties dependent on succeeding referents in text for meaning are cataphoric. For example:

5. He's a great guy.

6. Yeah, John's number one.

Anaphoric and cataphoric references, collectively referred to as endophoric references, convey meaning through the interdependence of linguistically encoded elements; meaning is lexicalized.

Exophoric reference conveys meaning contextually rather than linguistically. For example: Give me that where that is defined by the speaker's pointing to an object rather than his/her defining that linguistically. Exophoric references are not cohesive because they do not convey meaning linguistically.

Register, the other constituent of text, explains how the situation variables of the discourse are linguistically incorporated into the text. Some settings are characterized by a register whose

meaning is conveyed contextually. Such a register is typically marked by frequent exophoric references. For example, two people are at the dinner table and one of them is cutting cake for dessert. The other person says I'll have a big one. One in this context is not an ambiguous reference to a piece of cake, even though it is not linguistically defined, because both people are consciously attending to the act of serving cake. The shared body of knowledge, cake being serving, does not need to be explicitly encoded for meaning to be conveyed in this situation.

Children in the present study were observed in two play settings within their preschool classroom: dramatic play (housekeeping corner) and constructive play (block corner) settings. Dramatic play, as defined by Smilansky (1968) has players: undertaking make-believe roles towards props and roles and verbally interacting with at least one other player to define these make-believe roles and props. Constructive play has players using materials toward a goal, or an end state (Smilansky, 1968).

Each play setting was hypothesized to elicit different forms of text. Constructive play should elicit non-cohesive text; the frequent use of exophora to introduce and sustain play episodes. That is, because manipulation of physically present objects typifies constructive play, the language in this setting should rely on context to convey meaning. Children's language in dramatic play episodes is characterized by them using language to transform conventional roles into fantasy roles. In order for play in this setting to be successfully introduced and sustained the player introducing the play episode must explicitly define the role transformations, e.g., I'll be the Mother you be the

Father. This setting should elicit more cohesive text i.e., more endophora, than the constructive play setting.

The process by which children introduced new play topics was hypothesized to vary across settings. Topic introductory utterances, or discourse topics (Li & Thompson, 1976), should mediate cohesive texts. That is, roles defined in the introductory utterances should provide the basis for cohesive ties throughout text.

The introduction of a discourse topic is a critical stage in the construction of text in most contexts (Goodenough & Weiner, 1976; Kennan & Schieffelin, 1976). First, the child introducing a new topic must successfully signal other players that a new topic is being introduced. Second, the introducer must make the topic introduction explicit enough to be understood by interlocutors. If topic initiation acts (Mehan, 1979) are unsuccessful on these two points the introduction will not be comprehended by the other players and play will not be successfully introduced.

The extent to which children's topic introductions are capable of eliciting cohesive text should vary according to setting. The introduction of a constructive play topic should be independent of explicit verbal definition of the play theme because the main theme of constructive play revolves around manipulation of objects, rather than talking about the manipulations. Dramatic play requires that children use language to redefine players' roles and props around a fantasy theme. Thus, the social dramatic play field should elicit topic introductions which mediate text.

To summarize, in this study we examined the extent to which

preschoolers' oral text varied across two play setting. The aspects of text examined were; the use of endophoric vs exophoric reference and the process by which new play topic were introduced.

Method

Four middle class children (two boys and two girls) ranging in age from 51-60 months participated in the study. They attended the morning session of a university preschool. All four children played in a separate area of their regular classroom for two successive days during their free play periods. The play area was equipped with a housekeeping corner (dress-up clothes, table and chairs, sink, refrigerator, stove, and telephone), a block area (large wooden building blocks), and a videotape camera. All children played in both areas for thirty minutes. A staff member of the preschool videotaped the children on two successive morning during free play periods. Because of the children's familiarity with videotape equipment and with the staff member the observations were thought to be minimumly obrusive.

Utterances were transcribed from the videotape verbatim by the author. Utterances were then coded for anophoric, catophoric, and exophoric reference (93% agreement between two coders). Play in each setting was divided into separate play episodes. The start of new episodes were defined as "overt attempts to arrive at shared meaning of what interactants are doing or plan to do" (Cook-Gumperz & Corsoro, 1977, p.45). The extent to which topic introductory utterances mediated texts was examined for each play episode.

Results/Discussion

Over the two day period of taped observations children engaged in ten constructive and eight dramatic play episodes. Children introducing play topics used similar strategies in both constructive and dramatic play settings; in both settings children frequently repeated their topic introductions. In dramatic play 50% (4:8) of the utterances introducing new topics were repetitions whereas 40% (4:10) of the introductory utterances were repetitions in constructive play. Another 40% of the constructive play introductions were yes/no questions. The remainder of the dramatic play introductions were directives (2), e.g., I'll be the father and you be the son; a sound effect (1) a phone ringing; and a greeting (1) Hi, my name's Joe.

Repetition of topic introductions has been observed frequently in discourse studies (Schegloff, 1968; Keenan & Klein, 1975). Repeated topic introductions alert interlocutors to a topic switch and remind interlocutors of their "pragmatic duty" (Keenan & Klein, 1975) to respond to the introductions. When interlocutors' responses to repeated introductions were examined in the present study the differential effects of the play settings became apparent.

Interlocutors in constructive play typically responded to repeated topic introductions motorically rather than linguistically; they began manipulating the blocks. In only one case of constructive play did a child verbally respond to a repeated topic introduction:

S_1 Let's do this.

S_1 Do this.

S_2 Good idea.

No subsequent utterances in this play episode were cohesive to the introduction. Similarly, when constructive play episodes were introduced with yes/no questions interlocutors answered the questions and then began manipulating blocks; the only utterances tied to the topic introductions were the immediate responses to the questions. These data suggest that constructive play introductions served two functions: they signalled a topic switch and they signalled other players to begin new manipulative activities. Players' responses to these introductions were motoric not linguistic. Thus, constructive play topic introductions did not mediate play episodes in this setting.

Dramatic play episodes seemed to elicit cohesive text, i.e., explicit topic introductions and linguistically negotiated roles. The linguistic negotiation of roles can be seen by examining the introductions of dramatic episodes. After children repeated their topic introductions interlocutors, in 3:4 cases, in-turn, repeated the introductions. Researchers have hypothesized that interlocutors' repetitions of topic introductions show their willingness to maintain the introduced theme as a discourse topic. These repetitions also function as requests for topic clarification; without clarifications interlocutors cannot add new information to the introduction (Slama-Cazacu, 1977; Nelson & Gruendel, 1979). When interlocutors repeated dramatic play introductions the child introducing the topic always responded by clarifying the introduction. Thus, introductions are clarified when interlocutors find them ambiguous. For example, a child repeated The red one. I want the red one, to initiate a new play theme involving a red hat. The interlocutor repeated The red one? in question form, marking the need for clarification of The red one. The

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introducer then clarified the ambiguous element one with: The red hat. There's only one over there (as he pointed to the pile of hats in the dress-up corner).

Besides repeating topic introductions to mark the need for clarification, dramatic play interlocutors also posed Wh and Yes/No questions to get introducers to be more explicit. In one session two children were talking to each other on telephones and one child introduced the theme of ordering pizzas: Three, make that two. OK make that seven. The auditor did not comprehend the theme, i.e., seven of what, so he used a Wh question for clarification: What do you want? The introducer then clarified the theme by stating that he wanted pizzas: We'll have pepperoni and cheese pizzas.

Children in both constructive play and dramatic play relied upon repetition to gain interlocutors' attention. Only in dramatic play did auditors frequently use reiteration and questions to get introducers to clarify play themes. The reason for this strategy may be due to the specific demands of each play setting. Dramatic play, according to Smilansky (1968), is dependent upon players' verbally defining the play episodes because these play situations are, by definition, fantastic and assign novel uses and roles to conventional props and players. Thus the need for an explicit negotiation of roles in the topic introductory utterances.

Topic introductory utterances mediated the oral texts generated in dramatic play settings. That is, introductions were the bases for cohesive ties throughout texts generated in this setting. Topic introductory utterances were often tied anophorically to referents throughout the text;

the introductions provided the theme for the whole play episode. For example, two girls engaged in a dramatic play episode of playing truck drivers used the first four lines of their play episode to allocate roles for the up-coming discourse: Hi; Hi; My name's Joe; My name's Randy. After these introductory utterances Joe and Randy were referred to as him and he throughout the texts, thus creating anaphoric cohesive ties. Roles were mediated by the introduction. The girls continued this truck driver theme until they were interrupted by another child. The interruption consisted of ten utterances, unrelated to the introductions, exchanged between the two girls and the one interloper. After the interruption subsided the girls resumed their truck driver theme through a tie back to the original topic introductory utterance: Now, Joe junked his truck. Joe was mentioned only to originally introduce the topic and and later, after the interruption, to reintroduce the topic. Joe, in the reintroduction, served as a tie back to the original play theme. Mention of Joe was enough to reintroduce successfully the original play theme, despite the interruption of ten unrelated utterances. The text of this play episode was mediated, generally, by the introductory utterances and specifically by the element, Joe in the introduction.

Children also used topic introductions containing cataphoric references to make introductions more explicit; elements in the first line were defined subsequent to their initial appearance. A young girl was found using cataphoric reference in the introduction of a fantasy theme in the housekeeping corner. She held up her soapy hands from the dishwashing pan and said: Look what I'm makin to mark the beginning of the episode. In the next utterance, I'm makin ice cream, she defined the what of the first utterance as ice cream; the role of the suds as ice cream was being defined explicitly for other players through cataphoric reference. If

this play episode was to be introduced successfully, the explicit re-definition of suds as ice cream was necessary to clarify the prop roles to all players. The mediation of the text by the introduction was evidenced by the other players' utterances cohering to the introduction; ice cream was referred to anaphorically as this, a near demonstrative reference; this was referred to anaphorically as that, a far demonstrative reference; and later as it, a pronominal. This text was constructed through explicit introductory utterances, using cataphoric reference, and ten subsequent utterances directly tied to these explicit topic statements.

The examination of topic introductions in constructive and dramatic play suggested that the latter setting is dependent upon explicit verbal definition and negotiation of play themes for introduction and sustenance. Players defined and negotiated roles in topic introductions. When introductions were unclear interlocutors requested and were given clarification. Introductions in this context mediated texts. Further evidence supporting the notion that dramatic play contexts elicit cohesive text is provided by the amount of exophora observed. In this setting 9% of all linguistic elements were exophoric compared to 21% in the constructive play context. Furthermore, each child generated more exophora in constructive play than he/she did in dramatic play.

These data suggest that dramatic players verbally define their referents; they do not rely on contextual cues to convey meaning. Dramatic play is sustained only when interlocutors correctly infer the roles and conventions for props and players (Griffin and Mehan, 1979). The role assignments and prop definitions can be conveyed only by explicit verbal

definition because the roles are abstract: objects' conventional appearance and function are independent of their meaning in the dramatic play episodes. For example, in dramatic play a shoe can represent a telephone receiver or an automobile. One therefore cannot rely on the object alone to convey meaning; meaning must be lexicalized.

Implications and Conclusions

Preschoolers' ability to construct cohesive text has implications for early childhood pedagogy. The pedagogical importance relates directly to one of the primary functions of early childhood education: for children to learn to encode explicitly their ideas into language and to be less dependent on contextual assumptions to convey meaning. Writing is only one example of a process requiring the lexicalization of meaning. Pellegrini (in press) found that kindergarteners' who tended to engage in dramatic play had higher writing achievement scores than children engaging in constructive or functional play. Thus, educators can facilitate children's using explicit language by structuring play environments which elicit this type of language.

In conclusion, the dramatic play context required children to convey meaning through explicit oral language in order to introuduce and sustain play episodes. It was noted in this study that children's explicit topic introductory utterances in dramatic play episodes served the purpose of defining the play theme. The extent to which lexical elements from the introduction were referred to anaphorically by players demonstrated how introductions mediated meaning for the whole text. When more explicit reference was required cataphoric reference was employed. Explicit intro-

ductions were necessary to elicit other players' responses in dramatic play because the theme of such episodes were not always obvious; players assigned novel roles to props and players. Thus, the dramatic play context calls for children to use explicit language if play is to be sustained. Unlike constructive play, which has children's language more reliant on contextual assumptions, the sustenance of dramatic play is dependent upon players' explicit verbal encoding of play themes and roles.

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